

**Sheila Young
of The Women's Therapy Centre
interviewed by**

Mary Charleton

Can you tell me how the Centre started and how you now work?

We began as a pilot project two years ago. There are now nine full and part-time workers. Our way of working is pragmatic rather than ideological. We do not aim to work as a collective but as a centre which offers good therapy and where the workers are developing ideas. Levels of commitment are different because of the differing amounts of time that people can give to the centre. Two people are responsible for the overall running of the place; one person is responsible for funding and another for administration. Policy decisions are taken at a monthly staff meeting and about once every six months we meet to talk about how we are all getting on together; this aspect also comes up on other occasions for example at our peer supervision sessions and in our study groups.

What about psychiatric supervision; is this a relevant issue?

I don't think psychiatry per se has a lot to offer us but supervision and consultation with more experienced group leaders is immensely valuable. The area of our work which I feel could be strengthened is that of liaison with sympathetic local GPs and psychiatrists. This is extremely important particularly with a very disturbed person who needs the structure of something like an Arbour Community. It would be unrealistic in view of our limited resources to try and cope with that kind of person here.

I gather that your waiting lists are very long.

Yes. There is a two-year's wait at the moment and this is one of the reasons for our interest in training other therapists. The other reason is that we feel we have developed a particular kind of expertise. Obviously there are many other workers who have specialized in working with women; some of these find that conventional accounts of women's psychology are inadequate and are drawn towards looking at what feminism offers; others are already alive to feminist issues and would like to combine this awareness with a therapeutic approach.

I am interested in the relationship between the centre and the Women's Movement. Perhaps we could look at that and then at the kind of therapy you offer.

I think the development has been interesting. In this country there has always been a strong anti-therapy feeling among feminists and in the Women's Movement as a whole. I certainly went through a phase of feeling that the whole point of consciousness raising groups was that you realize that your oppression came from outside, from political and social sources, and that you no longer had to carry around this burden that you were a neurotic wreck. This was immensely liberating. However, I came to realize that while personal difficulties can be related to what is happening out there, much of that also gets built into the psyche and therapy has a part to play in the awareness and undoing of that. It became so obvious that there were people around who felt very distressed and some of these were people who had tried to put ideas from the Women's Movement into practice. So for three or four years people started running self-help groups, adopting ideas from Red Therapy and gradually taking a more positive attitude towards counselling and therapy. Prior to that to say you were interested in therapy was like saying you were not a feminist. Now it is accepted that if physical health is a relevant issue then mental health is as well and there is support for the idea of Community Health Councils, for example: the centre is, in theory at least, involved in the Islington Community Health Council and we feel that is very important.

Would it be true to say that the work that people do here is their way of being part of the Women's Movement?

I think that everyone here has been part of the Women's Movement. But what has happened recently is that their areas of involvement have become much more specialized so that working here would certainly be a way of being part of the movement. I am working on a book which is about self-help therapy and that and my work here are my ways of being part of the movement as a whole. I would like to be involved on a much broader political front but simply haven't the time. I think this is something that happens in this kind of work. You concentrate on areas which are important to you and to which you are prepared to give up time.

And your priority seems to be working with individuals and groups here in the centre.

Yes and the important aspect seems to be looking at the needs of women from a feminist perspective.

Can you tell me how that is done here? How do you offer therapy that has a feminist perspective?

Perhaps I could look at the way it happened historically and then talk about the kind of therapy we now offer. The people who started the centre became

involved in therapy from a feminist standpoint. They were in consciousness raising groups and becoming more aware of their own life experiences and the need to become more active and self-defining. But at the same time they knew that they were not dealing with the long term effects of a paternalistic society and how values get internalized and passed from mother to daughter. Feminist therapy needs to look at basic routines of childcare and devise ways of becoming more aware of how the conditioning process is started and how the female child is prepared for the traditional female role.

Obviously we work with people at many different levels. At the Workshop level we are dealing mainly with present difficulties although in dealing with these there is sometimes a need to relate the present to the past. The main aim of the workshops is to help people to realize how they are, to get in touch with their feelings and above all to find out more about those aspects of themselves which are important to how they are as women. These can either be in terms of issues like "Dependency" or we have a new workshop that is called "Needing to Please", which is, I think, an interesting idea. In the last session we also had a workshop called "Women Alone" which raised very important issues for women in this society. There is a great deal of sharing of experience of what it is like to be a woman now. Although the workshops are set up to look at present difficulties, there are hidden psychodynamic assumptions. And of course for some women it is necessary to go back and look in depth at earlier stages.

In those cases where work is being done over a long period, are you aware of using a particular model?

Some people started out with a psycho-dynamic model. For others it was something that developed in their work. For example I came from Red Therapy where the techniques were from Humanistic Psychology but where again I think there are many hidden psychodynamic assumptions. I am now aware that I now use a much more psychodynamic approach than I would have thought possible. I do not reject experiential techniques but have found in my own therapy and in my work with others where you are helping some one almost to restructure their being, there is no substitute for working step by step at the client's pace through the relationship between client and therapist.

Is there a particular client with whom you felt this approach was important?

I think it is particularly important with all the clients I see in long term therapy. When I say it is important, I mean I find it helpful as a way of looking at a client. I am not a very theoretical worker; in some ways I wish I were. But a lot of people's difficulties are in getting close to another person. They express ideas like "I can't express my feelings.' If only I could show my pain, my anger, it would all be all right".

Where someone has real difficulty in expressing or experiencing herself as a person, then I think the object relations approach is really good because the emphasis is not on having to repress horrible instincts but on the earliest contact between the child and the breast and the effects this has on later relationships.

I am interested in how, using this method, you also make use of the feminist perspective.

I think it is consistent with being feminist to look at the relationship in terms two people rather than to make use of instinct theory. Feminists take exception to assumptions about male and female instincts. But, more importantly, when you consider the position of a woman seeking therapy, it matters to both of us that we recognize that we have been through the same experience of growing up as women: we share the experience of not being validated as being people in our own right. That is obviously carried on in the way that mothers relate to their daughters. At a very early stage the mother may experience highly ambivalent wishes: - the wish to do for her daughter what was never really done for herself - and breaking through this all the time there is the impossibility of ever being able to do this and perhaps not really ever wanting to do this. Perhaps, unconsciously, the woman doesn't want to give her daughter things she never had herself. And again if she is to bring her daughter up to be a successful woman in this society, maybe she has to be brought up in such a way that she does not make demands for herself. It is the experience certainly of some women that in order to be an acceptable woman it is necessary to sabotage some aspects of her personality. These things necessarily influence the relationship with the therapist and must in some way be worked out within it.

There is sometimes a need to avoid the threats posed by this kind of relationship and the client will try to redefine the relationship in some way, perhaps by trying to convert the relationship into a social one. Do you answer questions from clients about your personal life?

I'll always answer questions but I don't talk about myself in a therapy session. That is because I now see the value of my being here for someone to project her feelings onto. If someone asks a personal question, I will always answer it but I will also say "Can we look at what this question means for you?". A relevant example occurred a few weeks ago. Someone said to me "I wonder if you have children because you always take your holiday to coincide with the school holidays". I didn't say "you are quite right, I do have children" or "I don't have children", I didn't answer, I left it and took up what she was feeling about me having a break at Christmas instead of just the Christmas-New Year week. If she had asked me directly, I would have answered, I think. I feel it doesn't necessarily break the fantasy.

It directs it a bit.

Yes, it directs it and I am not sure that is a bad thing. What amazes me is how quickly people get back to their own fantasies.

Perhaps it is more difficult to get to the fantasy level with people who are accustomed to using intellectualisation and rationalisation as a defence. I suppose I am thinking of middle class people who would perhaps be in the majority among your clients.

We see women from quite a wide range of backgrounds. However, they are mostly middle class in terms of education. But thinking back to my own experience of straight psychoanalysis - that offered me more opportunities for rationalization than the kind of therapy we do here. I pick up on feelings very directly, using humanistic techniques where appropriate. I get people to become more aware of their bodies and suggest ways of doing this. So in that sense what I do here is very different from what my experience of psychoanalysis was. From the self disclosure angle my own therapist never gave me the time of day about himself but I found I didn't want to know a great deal about him and I find a lot of my clients are like that. They don't really want to know much about me. Some people do but quite a lot would rather not know, they hate it if they meet me in the street. I think from the therapist's point of view there is always the fear of messing up the transference. But I will always try to explain what we are doing here to the woman and say "You will have all sorts of funny feelings about me and I am going to encourage those feelings and work with them. The reason for this is that this is a safe relationship, safe enough to explore those feelings and their meaning for you". "I think that once people have an explanation they can leave it alone. Occasionally people try to get me in discussion about therapy. If that happens, I say "Is this how you want to spend your session?" I try to always bring it back to the feeling level with something like "I've a hunch you are feeling quite frightened", almost an inter-pretation I suppose. I think you can work on that dual level.

It sounds as though you explain your role thereby perhaps removing the power and mystery.

I think the experience for the client is still that I have all the power.

So a client has the experience of an intimate relationship with a powerful woman, a mother figure. In this case the clients are all women. Is that important for you?

For me, yes. Others here see collective households, couples, etc. and although I choose to work only with women at the moment I certainly feel that changes must happen with men also.

What changes would you like to see happen with men?

I think the fundamental change that has to happen with men is that they **should** relate awarely to one another as well as to women. I would like to see them take responsibility for the emotional aspects of a relationship and see women encourage them to do this. This is a value that is always near the surface when I am working with individuals or with groups.

Can we look now at group work?

I co-lead the on-going women's therapy group which has been going for two and a half years, meets once a week for three hours and has ten women in it. I realize that for an analytic group that is a long time but for a more expressive group that is an average amount of time. Again we find that people get more out of the group if we try and look in depth at what is happening between members of the group and between them and us rather than encourage them to do a piece of work on themselves. I think there is great value in being in the group and seeing how you are similar and different from others in it. The backgrounds are not homogeneous and yet there is a lot of common experience. People find that their experience is paralleled by others, not necessarily people in the same position as themselves. Emotional similarities come through a difference in backgrounds. I think I have already described some of the other groups we do. These are on a specific theme which is related to the position of women in society and they aim to help women combat stereotyped ideas of how they are and how they should relate to the world as well as become more aware of themselves and their feelings.

You have shown me very clearly that the Women's Liberation Movement as well as the Women's Therapy Centre are concerned with the inner as well as the outer world. I hear your statement about men and the way you would like to see them change: you would like to see men take more responsibility for the emotional side of a relationship. Is there a way in which you would like to see women change so that their relationships could be more equal and more fulfilled?

I think what I have said implies my view on this but what I would say as a concluding statement looking at the women's issue both politically and emotionally, both inside herself and outside, my feeling is that women as well as being second class citizens socially are also second class citizens emotionally and that it is time they found time for themselves and their own development so that they reach fulfilment themselves and not through others.
